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Bulgaria and NATO: 7 Lost Years

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Conclusions

- Bulgaria's actions and policies on military reform between 1990 and March 1997 left the country's institutions and military largely unprepared for integration with the Alliance.
- Bulgarian government and military officials have emerged from the state's self-imposed isolation lacking an understanding of how far behind they are, as well as what they need to do, to seek integration.
- Bulgaria's armed forces are only now starting to reform and downsize. The resultant social and economic pain has yet to be felt, and the state is likely to suffer significant political consequences.
- Some social and political figures may elect to portray the United States and NATO as the cause of Bulgaria's social, economic, and political pain. Bulgaria's citizens, politicians and military need NATO to better define its standards for interoperability.

NATO's Enlargement "Principles"

Since the beginning of the Partnership for Peace (PFP) program in January 1994, NATO has been refining its criteria for enlargement. The *NATO Enlargement Study*, briefed in September 1995, emphasized that candidate states should be democratic, protective of individual liberty and human/minority rights, and dedicated to the rule of law. The study also indicated that civil governments should control their militaries, and possess certain levels of military capabilities and NATO interoperability.

In 1996, after three rounds of discussions with NATO concerning prospective desires to join the Alliance, Bulgaria--under Bulgarian Socialist Party rule--concluded that it did *not* want to pursue membership. Only after a February 1997 change in government did Bulgaria formally announce an aspiration toward NATO membership.

Premature Quest for NATO Membership?

Bulgaria has only recently become quite active in its quest for "second tranche" candidacy for NATO

membership (along with Romania and Slovenia). Members of the new government believe that their change of policy and good intentions are enough to merit serious consideration. Though Bulgaria now appears serious in its quest, unfortunately it has lost seven years. Bulgaria is still trying to understand what is expected of it, and remains ill-prepared.

Part of Bulgaria's problem stems from the fact that NATO's information programs have not reached their audience. This contributes to the fact that many responsible politicians as well as the broader Bulgarian society have an insufficient understanding of NATO. This situation has been exacerbated by the lack of societal consensus as reflected in Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) opposition to NATO membership. Because the Bulgarian leadership and society do not yet really understand how much time they have lost, and just how much work remains to be done, NATO needs to clearly define its interoperability standards.

Assessing Bulgaria's Progress

Bulgaria's candidacy for NATO membership can be assessed based upon its progress in fulfilling the following "criteria":

Political reform/democratization. Bulgaria has held democratic elections and exhibited a peaceful transfer of power from the Bulgarian Communist Party under Todor Zhivkov to the Union for Democratic Forces (UDF) in 1991. Power returned to the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) in 1994, and with the implosion of the Bulgarian economy in 1996, a caretaker government was set up under Renata Indzhova until elections returned the Union of Democratic Forces to power in the Spring 1997. The political system appears to work, but the ability of the new government to implement economic reform will significantly determine whether or not lasting political reform can take hold in Bulgaria. If the new government fails to meet popular expectations for the economy, confidence in democratic rule could wane.

Economic reform. The political system experienced enormous stress in 1996 because of economic collapse. The new government, to its credit, has implemented the beginnings of real economic reform. It has introduced a currency board to stabilize the currency and has begun what likely will prove to be a painful, but hopefully successful, economic transformation.

Treatment of ethnic minorities. Bulgaria's demographics suggest a declining population of about 8.5 million people. Its decline is due to a high death rate, declining birthrate (only 60,000 in 1997), and emigration (650,000 since 1989). The size of the Turkish minority is roughly 850,000 (10 percent) and is represented by the Movement for Rights and Freedom (MRF) party in Parliament. The issue of the Turkish minority has eased since the late 1980s anti-Turk campaign of then Bulgarian Communist Party leader Todor Zhivkov, which led to the emigration of some 300,000 Turks. With the change in government in the early 1990s, many Turks returned to Bulgaria, and the MRF pushed for the rights of Turkish citizens to serve as conscripts in the regular armed forces, rather than in the construction troops, and to become military officers. Although little appears to have been done about it, it is no longer a "visible" political issue.

Relations with neighbors. While Bulgaria has shown signs that it is starting to address problems with its neighbors, there is yet much to do.

- **Turkey**--Deep-seated distrust regarding its Turkish ethnic minority has prevailed. Bulgarians have feared that the Turkish minority would create a serious problem if a Greek-Turkish conflict

erupted. Some saw Turkey as a potential enemy; others, who are pro-NATO, see Bulgarian membership as protection against Turkey. This has clearly changed with the new government which seeks NATO membership and has actively attempted to develop trilateral cooperation with Turkey and Romania (e.g., the October 6, 1997 trilateral agreement to combat organized crime) with the ultimate goal of drawing in Greece to enhance subregional stability.

- **Greece**--Relations with Greece have been traditionally close. Recent Bulgarian efforts to create trilateral cooperation with Greece and Romania are seen as a first step to create eventual "quadrilateral" security ties with Turkey. This is a very constructive Bulgarian effort intended to produce security in the Balkans.
- **Romania**--Earlier Bulgarian feelings that Romania resists contact because it wants to be seen as "Central European" have been overcome, to some extent, by the recent trilateral cooperation. Nevertheless many Bulgarians apparently still feel that they are "competing" with Romania for NATO membership.
- **Macedonia**--A bilateral Treaty of Friendship has been delayed because of argument over the "Macedonian" language and Macedonian "claims to Bulgaria's history." In June 1997 Petur Stoyanov visited towns in southwestern Bulgaria and made appeals for regularized relations. This remains an unfinished item of business that must be completed and will require some compromise.
- **Russian Federation**--The Russian Federation presses Bulgaria to reduce its Western commitments, even as Russia continues to have a cultural influence on Bulgarians. Bulgaria is also heavily dependent economically (oil and gas) on Russia. Hence, Russia's actions will likely affect Bulgaria's "sense" of freedom of maneuver.

Democratic control of the military. Bulgaria's experience over the past seven years has shown that the executive has control of the military, but changes in the government have resulted in a declining, rather than increasing, number of members of parliament who have the experience to exercise legislative oversight of the defense community.

- **Constitution and Defense Law**--Bulgaria has a parliamentary system with a directly elected president. As commander-in-chief, the president exerts moral authority. This arrangement has worked thus far in Bulgaria. It was successfully tested during cohabitation between President Zhelyu Zhelev and Prime Minister Zhan Videnov.

The authority of the Bulgarian executive was successfully tested when Defense Minister Georgi Ananiev (and Prime Minister Ivan Kostov) relieved Colonel General Tsvetan Totomirov (now President Petur Stoyanov's military adviser) as the chief of staff on June 9, 1997 replacing him with Air Force Col. Gen. Mikho Mikhov. They justified the change by introducing the principle of "rotation." Executive authority was again validated when the President relieved Major General Angel Marin, commander of the rocket forces, after he openly criticized military reforms adopted by the government. The executive was further tested, during the previous BSP government, when public unrest erupted in December 1996-January 1997 with Bulgaria's economic collapse. The Consultative Council on National Security (which includes the president and prime minister, ministers of defense, foreign affairs, interior and finance, Chief of General Staff, Parliamentary spokesman, and members of all Parliamentary political parties) hammered out a common stand and decided to hold early elections. In sum, Bulgaria's executive arrangements appear to work, and efforts to create consensus seem to dominate.

- **Parliamentary Oversight**--The 240-member parliament is comprised of the Union of Democratic Forces (UDF) with 52 percent of the vote holding an absolute majority of 137 seats. The BSP with 22 percent of the vote has 58 seats; the MRF, 19; EuroLeft, 14; and Bulgarian Business Bloc (BBB), 12. The major weakness of the parliament regarding oversight functions lies in its lack of

continuity; roughly 100 of the UDF MPs are new, having no prior experience. Of the 240 total, only seven MPs carry over from 1990, and only about 20 (8 percent) from the previous parliament. A "silent" majority (an estimated 60 percent of the MPs) have never taken the floor. In contrast to other transition states where parliamentary expertise is slowly expanding with each Parliament, Bulgaria's seems to be shrinking. This factor affects the quality of Bulgaria's parliamentary oversight.

The National Security Committee has 21 MPs; it comprises opposition members based upon the principle of proportional representation. It has no professional staff and only three of its MPs, to include former defense minister Loudzhev, served in previous parliaments. Although the committee calls on the defense minister and Chief of General Staff to testify on the defense budget, the law on defense, and NATO, its membership lacks previous military and executive defense experience, discussions have been muted, and its ability to critically assess the force structure and budget appears limited. In addition, though the authority for intelligence oversight resides in the National Security Committee, there is no apparent evidence of oversight occurring. (Hence, compared with other transition states to include Romania, Bulgaria's National Security Committee is particularly weak.)

The Foreign Affairs (and Integration) Committee has 23 MPs (with two vice chairmen from opposition parties) and oversees European Union and NATO integration. Assen Agov (UDF), chairman of the committee, added "integration" to the committee's name to emphasize the shift in Bulgaria's policy. Though its debates have been animated on issues such as the National Security Strategy, Macedonia, and deployment of Bulgarian troops abroad, it is important to note that Bulgaria still lacks a consensus on NATO integration. In this regard, Bulgaria also differs from Romania, as well as Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary (who have achieved candidate status).

- **Defense Ministry**--Bulgaria's huge defense ministry (of roughly 2,000-2,200 plus a General Staff of 700) still lacks sufficiently trained personnel and the capacity to perform effective basic functions such as transparent multi-year budgeting, long-term defense planning, and personnel management. Bulgaria still needs to build a stable defense planning system, which requires a proper civil service.

The defense ministry comprises three deputy defense ministers plus the Chief of the General Staff, who according to a June 1997 draft amendment, would become a deputy defense minister directly subordinate to the defense minister.

In theory, military intelligence, counterintelligence, and military police are no longer in the General Staff, but report to the defense minister, not the Chief of the General Staff. (In this area, transparency does not yet exist and it is quite difficult to assess just what is really occurring.) In other words, Prime Minister Ivan Kostov is the first Prime Minister since 1989 who has theoretical control of and access to specialized information.

Fundamentally, the defense ministry has the same four components that had been established between December 1991 and May 1992. But, specific functions (directorates) appear to have shifted so often that it is very difficult to assess the effectiveness of communication between civilian defense ministry bodies and the General Staff directorates. Apparent redundancy adds to the confusion and it is difficult to determine accountability and to identify where responsibility lies for the following key functions:

- the long-term budget program connected to long-term planning.
- establishing a link between defense planning and economic resources.

- determining the linkage between the personnel policy performed under Deputy Defense Minister Kunchev and the personnel directorate under the First Deputy Chief of the General Staff.
- ensuring that adequate intelligence is provided to the defense and prime ministers.

In sum, compared to neighboring transition defense ministries, Bulgaria's is extremely large and very confusing. Bulgaria's 3,000 person (civilian and military) defense structure is roughly twice the size of Poland; though Bulgaria's 107,000 troops are roughly one-half Poland's 218,000 troops.

Military capability and NATO interoperability. Reform and restructuring of the military has not yet really begun. In the fall of 1991 the Bulgarian Armed Forces (BAF) totaled 107,000 (with 46,000 professionals) and it remains at that level.

The current government approved the three stage Defense Reform that envisions to cut the military to 65,000 maximum by 2010.

- The first phase was completed in 1997 when the forces were still roughly 107,000. What did occur during the final four months of 1997 was that roughly 60 professionals were hired. (During 1998 Bulgaria plans to hire roughly another 1,700-2,000 professionals for the forces.)
- The second phase (1998-2000) envisions the forces falling to 75,000 in three corps. The Rapid Reaction Corps (at 70 percent manning and 100 percent equipment) and the First and Third Army Corps in the west and east at lower manning levels. Most of the initial cuts will be through reducing annual conscriptions from 50,000 to 30,000; and from an immediate cut of 5,000 professionals. Conscription would be reduced from 18 to 12 months.
- The third phase reduces the force to 65,000 with plans to modernize its inventory with the resulting savings.

Bulgaria is only now beginning the real, painful, and sensitive stage of military reform. In contrast, Hungary already has reduced its forces from 120,000 to 52,000; Poland from 405,000 to 218,000; the Czech Republic from 130,000 to 58,000. The Defense and Armed Forces Bill can reduce the forces by establishing mandatory retirement for colonels at 52 years of age, and generals at 56.

Bulgaria's defense budget has been severely limited; and it is likely to remain so because the International Monetary Fund discourages any increases in the defense budget which will likely be necessary for military reorganization. Bulgaria spent 800 million leva for military restructuring for the period September-December 1997; the 1998 Defense Budget of 487.45 billion leva (roughly 2 percent of GDP) allocates roughly 25 billion leva (about U.S. \$14 million) for troop relocation and military reform. (Of the 25 billion, 10 billion is slated for construction and repair of housing; no equipment is to be purchased.)

Bulgaria operates at a disadvantage on the question of NATO interoperability because it has not made effective use of U.S. programs and has remained relatively isolated. While many Bulgarian officers have been trained through the U.S. international military educational training (IMET) programs, military-to-military teams, and the George C. Marshall Center, they--in marked contrast to other transition states--have *not* been promoted to "visible" and responsible positions to push reform forward. For example, the top military leadership in Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Romania is predominantly Western (and IMET)-trained.

Bulgaria also operates at a disadvantage because it has not been very active in international peacekeeping operations. For example, while Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic, and Romania have been working with IFOR/SFOR since January 1996 with units at battalion strength, Bulgaria didn't contribute any units until July 1997 when it sent a 35-man engineering platoon to join Dutch troops in SFOR (with most of the expenses to be borne by the Netherlands) with a second unit beginning in December 1997. It recently agreed to deploy a 28-man transport platoon, subordinate to the Greek unit, for SFOR to begin in June 1998. The result is that Bulgaria's military officers, compared to other partners, have had much less day-to-day operational experience with NATO. Hence, there has been little or no transfer of NATO (lessons learned) experience into Bulgaria's military training, troop rotation planning, and English-language experience that has been evident with the other partners.

In sum, Bulgarian politicians have taken little action toward Euro-Atlantic integration until recently. As a result, their knowledge of, and experience with, NATO remains relatively limited. Though the new government has taken some encouraging new steps, Bulgarians need to understand how far behind their previous governments' actions have put them. The fact that they justified upcoming defense cuts as a NATO requirement (which is not the case) has created misunderstanding and has alienated the officer corps.

While the United States and NATO should stress that NATO is an "open" Alliance and that we welcome Bulgaria's desire to join, Bulgaria must understand that membership will only come after consistent policies and activities have been evident. Because Bulgaria has lost seven years, we must be clear and consistent in telling Bulgaria what is expected of it and how long that road will likely be.

Recommendations

- Bulgarian parliamentarians need training in defense budgeting and other defense and intelligence matters to exert more effective oversight. The George C. Marshall Center, which is to hold a budgeting seminar for parliamentarians, is a first step in the right direction.
- The Defense Ministry needs help to reform. The U.K. ministry of defense should be encouraged to provide a top-down assessment, as it has already done for Hungary and Romania. The United States needs to coordinate its bilateral efforts in defense budgeting, planning, and resource and personnel management.
- Since further work is needed in the downsizing and redeploying of Bulgarian forces, military professionalism, and quality of life, U.S. bilateral (IMET and military-to-military) activities should be focused in this direction. We need to consistently stress the need for reciprocity if the Bulgarians want these programs to continue (e.g., to use IMET graduates more effectively).
- Not only are NATO educational programs urgently needed, but it also needs to be stressed that maintaining friendly relations with Russia and applying for NATO membership are not contradictory, just as the need to cut armed forces is not a NATO requirement.

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